

 CASE STUDY

# Bixby Memorial Free Library



## Location

Vergennes, Vermont

## Staff Size

4 FTE

## Population

2,566

As recipients of a \$20,000 grant through **Libraries Transforming Communities: Accessible Small and Rural Communities**, Bixby Memorial Free Library is committed to preserving the building's historic charms while equally dedicated to making the building more accessible to seniors and others with mobility disabilities.

Recently, the Bixby Memorial Free Library ("the Bixby") was awarded an LTC grant to enhance accessibility for patrons with mobility disabilities. Located in Vergennes, Vermont, the library was established in 1912 through a bequest from William Gove Bixby, and is housed in a Greek Revival building that is both a local landmark and a nationally recognized historic site. The

library plays a central role in community affairs; patrons refer to it as an "icon" and as a "main focus" of local life.

This is particularly true for older adults. Like many rural libraries, the Bixby serves an area where a significant percentage of the population is over 65. Some patrons have been regulars for over 50 years, and appreciate the opportunities

the Bixby offers for taking tai chi classes or playing bridge (among other offerings). They also appreciate how well the building has been preserved over the years. "It's clear it's well taken care of," one says. "You can feel the love."

## GATHERING COMMUNITY INPUT

Catharine Hays is the library's director. While committed

to preserving the building's historic charms (including its grand marble staircases), she is equally dedicated to making the Bixby more accessible to seniors and others with mobility disabilities. To gather community insights on this question, she and Cedar Winslow (the library's Community Engagement Manager) took a multi-pronged approach, hosting a community conversation, distributing a "Let's Make the Bixby Accessible to All" questionnaire, and holding discussions with the local Rotary club and other partners.

Community feedback revealed several accessibility challenges confronting patrons—both inside and outside the Bixby. Whether it be issues with the uneven surface of the parking lot, a lack of streetside stair railings, doors that can only be opened manually, the absence of stroller parking,

shelving arrangements that impede wheelchair access, or a lack of services for those unable to leave their homes, Hays and Winslow learned a great deal about existing barriers to physical accessibility at the Bixby. So, too, did they learn about other barriers—such as limited resources for patrons with hearing or vision-related disabilities.

### TAKING ACTION

After gathering community feedback, Hays and Winslow took immediate action. Outside the building, they removed diseased trees, enhanced curbside pickup services, and added stroller parking. Staff enlisted members of the local high school's "Green Team" to beautify the library's ADA entrance, filling planters with colorful flowers, expanding a perennial bed along the walkway, and removing dirt from the sidewalks. To improve



Cedar Winslow,  
the Bixby's  
Community  
Engagement  
Manager

communication between the circulation desk and the ADA entrance (which is [accessible through the ground-level entrance to the building](#)), staff installed a video doorbell system. They also purchased new assistive devices for patrons with vision, hearing, and fine motor skills challenges; as a result, all programs are now equipped with microphones.

In addition to making accessibility upgrades, Hays and Winslow realized the need to build awareness of already existing accessibility features within the Bixby. "We can come up with these great ideas," Winslow says, "but how do we get the word out to the right people?" To improve their communication efforts, the library launched an "Accessibility Awareness Campaign" across social media and local news outlets. The campaign featured a [video](#) that demonstrated how to use the LULA Lift, a spotlight on the library's assistive devices collection, and a reminder of curbside pickup services. Additionally, accessibility information was expanded on the library's website, to better inform patrons about available resources.



The Bixby, viewed from above



Bixby Library Director Catharine Hays with Green Team volunteer leader Ethan Croke



A view from inside the Bixby

## PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

The campaign to improve accessibility at the Bixby includes several more long-term plans. The library used some of its LTC funds to hire a local architect, who will create a comprehensive architectural plan for the entire site that addresses accessibility concerns. Patrons recognize that any architectural changes must adhere to regulations governing historic sites, but are hopeful about the prospects for long-term improvements in accessibility. *"I think it's very solvable,"* one says. *"It just takes the right architect, an understanding of the historical*

*significance, and securing the funding."*

The Bixby is also optimistic about the potential for long-term improvements. As a result of feedback collected through the LTC grant, the Bixby's Board of Trustees has made accessibility one of the library's strategic objectives for the next 3–5 years, with a focus on *"minimizing physical barriers to all spaces in the building."*

In support of these goals, the Bixby has leveraged community input to build new partnerships and secure new funding. The

library recently received a [Vermont Municipal Energy Resiliency Program Grant](#) to help advance ADA compliance. Moving forward, the library is planning to hold another round of community conversations, this time with people who don't currently visit the Bixby. Hays hopes to undertake a *"big listening campaign"* that will provide insights into the barriers that prevent people from accessing the library. Through these efforts, the Bixby plans to make their building more welcoming and accessible to all. ■

*Photos courtesy of Caleb Kenna*

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